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NORTH SLESWICK
UNDER
PRUSSIAN RULE
1864-1914

BY
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WITH A MAP

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NORTH SLESWICK UNDER PRUSSIAN RULE

1864-1914

AN Englishman who had seen the war of 1864, in which Denmark was attacked by the powerful States of Austria and Prussia and compelled to surrender the Duchies of Sleswick, Lauenburg, and Holstein, commented on the Treaty of Vienna (October 30, 1864), by which Denmark acknowledged her defeat, in the following prophetic words :—

This is the result and the reward of Austro-Prussian policy ; it is unjust to the weaker side, grossly inconsistent with the obligations of the stronger. When time shall have brought about a state of things more favourable to Denmark than has existed through 1864, when perchance the oppressed Danish nationality of Sleswick shall be rescued from alien tyrants, then, if this Treaty of Vienna should be used as evidence against the Danes, let Englishmen remember what it is, and how it was obtained.

Under the treaty Denmark had to cede not only the German Duchies of Holstein and Lauenburg, which were members of the German Confederation, but also the ancient Danish borderland of Sleswick, or South Jutland, to give it the name preferred by the Danes. The Holsteiners had expected that, as a result of the treaty, they would be formed into an independent German State of 'Schleswig-Holstein'. But these hopes were not fulfilled either in 1864, or when Austria and

Prussia had gone to war (1866) over the Duchies, among other questions, and Austria had been beaten by her rival. The reason which Austria and Prussia had given for attacking Denmark was that they regarded the Duke of Augustenborg as the lawful heir to the Duchies. Austria and the smaller States of the German Confederation had honestly supported the Augustenborg claim. For Bismarck, who already controlled Prussian policy, this claim was only a stalking-horse. It was reduced to a dead letter by the decision at which the Prussian law-officers arrived in 1865. The question which Bismarck submitted to them was this: Who was the rightful heir to the Duchies after the death (1863) of Frederick VII, the last Danish king of the House of Oldenburg? The two claimants were Christian IX, who had succeeded Frederick on the Danish throne, and the Duke of Augustenborg. The lawyers decided in favour of Christian IX. But, by the Treaty of Vienna, he had ceded all his rights in the Duchies to Austria and Prussia. Hence, in 1865, these two Powers practically partitioned the Duchies. After the Austro-Prussian War of 1866 they were entirely annexed by Prussia.

Thus the Holsteiners and the Germans of South Sleswick saw their dream of independence annihilated; and the Danish element in Sleswick was handed over to the tender mercies of Prussian bureaucracy and militarism. At the date of the Treaty of Vienna the Duchy of Sleswick possessed a population of about 400,000 souls, distributed as follows: some 190,000 in North Sleswick, 150,000 in South Sleswick, 60,000 in the central district. A census taken in 1855 had shown that of this population there were 190,000 who spoke German only, 150,000 who spoke Danish only, while the remainder were bilingual. But then, as now, the

language of daily life was not altogether an infallible test of political sympathies. This was particularly the case in Central Sleswick, where the population had either lost all interest in Danish nationality or were in favour of an independent 'Schleswig-Holstein' which should be included in the German Confederation. The principal town of Central Sleswick was Flensburg; in 1864 the inhabitants were on the whole German-speaking—a state of things which has changed in the past fifty years—and yet were Danish in their sympathies. The exact opposite was the case with Tönder, a town in the west of Central Sleswick.

Flensburg and Tönder are connected by a railway, and it is to the north of this line that the present Danish population of Sleswick, numbering about 150,000 souls, is concentrated. It is Danish not only in the sense that it speaks the Danish language; its members regard themselves as compatriots of the Danes of Denmark. The frontier which was drawn between Denmark and the Duchies in 1864 is an unnatural frontier. It does not correspond to the distribution of the Danish and German nationalities.

These expatriated Danes are largely yeoman farmers; but there are also the tradesmen and the artisans of the small towns of Haderslev, Aabenraa, and Sønderborg. The whole population holds its own in the face of opponents who have steadily become more powerful, and of a calculated policy of oppression which is now far more severe than it was fifty years ago. Prussia vanquished Denmark after a campaign of some four months. But the battle against Danish nationalism in Sleswick has been proceeding from that time to the present; and in this battle the aggressors are further off from victory than they ever were.

The early years of Prussian rule in Sleswick were a period of transition; the final destiny of the Duchy was still undecided. Bismarck was chiefly occupied in thwarting the hopes of the 'Schleswig-Holstein' party; and during 1865 the rule of the Prussian police over North Sleswick was comparatively mild. Bismarck carried his policy of favouring the Danish population to such a point that he caused the local official gazette to publish the following declaration:—

The oppression of the Danish nationality in North Sleswick would be not only unjust, but also extremely impolitic, because it would produce a constant agitation among the inhabitants, and would have the necessary result of causing the North Sleswickers to turn their gaze continually towards the north; they would lose their sympathy with the Duchies, and would maintain their friendly feeling towards Denmark.

In fact, the 'Schleswig-Holsteiners' were told that they would only frustrate their cherished hopes if they endeavoured to germanize their Danish fellow citizens. Very different was the tone which Prussia adopted when both elements in Sleswick, the Danish and the German, had definitely been brought under her rule.

While the 'Schleswig-Holsteiners' saw their last hopes fade with the Austrian defeat in 1866, the Danes gained a definite promise in the Treaty of Prague, 1866, a promise which, though never carried out and cancelled in 1878, still forms the Magna Charta of the Danes in North Sleswick.

By the fifth article of this treaty, inserted on the suggestion of Napoleon III, the population of the northern districts of Sleswick should be ceded to Denmark, when it expressed the desire of a union with Denmark by means of a free vote.

Soon afterwards the Danes had an opportunity granted them of a 'rehearsal' of such a referendum. This was afforded by the elections of 1867 to the Constituent Assembly of the North German Federation and to the North German Reichstag.

At the first of these elections 27,488 Danish against 39,593 German votes were registered in the whole of Sleswick; Flensburg and the other towns, except Tönder in the northern part, showed a Danish majority; and many districts of the south showed Danish minorities.

On the second occasion the votes were 25,598 against 24,664; but though the Danes had been able to return two candidates at the previous election, their present majority only secured the election of one Danish candidate against three Germans.

This is the first instance recorded of what in Sleswick is called 'electioneering geometry', in America 'jerry-mandering': shuffling the various counties about so as to form an electoral division favourable to the Germans.

The two overwhelmingly Danish counties of Haderslev and Sønderborg form one division, though separated by the county of Aabenraa. The latter, with its fairly considerable German minority, has been joined on to that of Flensburg, where there are few Danish votes; and the strong Danish minority in Tönder County also finds itself without representation in the Reichstag.

In the Prussian Diet, which is returned by a restricted electorate, the Danes are, however, still able to maintain their two members.

The article in the Treaty of Prague (1866) whereby North Sleswick's right of free action received treaty recognition, proved, however, somewhat injurious to the Danish cause. The first representatives sent to Berlin

were Messrs. Krüger and Ahlmann; they refused to take the constitutional oath as members of the Diet, claiming that they only attended to indicate the unsettled position of North Sleswick and to demand the fulfilment of the promise granted them:

We are Danes, we wish to remain Danes, and as Danes we wish to be treated according to the provisions of international law.

This was their one and only election cry.

As time passed and the promise of reunion with Denmark became more and more a dead letter, a somewhat bitter quarrel broke out among the leaders of the movement. 'Oath-refusers' opposed 'oath-takers'; the former were in favour of passive resistance to Prussian aggression; the latter desired the more active policy of taking part in parliamentary discussions in order to press the claims of the Sleswick Danes. Up to the death of Krüger (1881) the party of passive resistance prevailed—a circumstance which, as the event proved, was detrimental to the interests of the Danish population.

The North Sleswickers had discovered that the promise made at Prague was as worthless as that other promise, to respect all legitimate national characteristics, which King William of Prussia had given when he annexed the Duchy. Between 1864 and 1870 many a young Dane asked the question why he should be obliged to swear allegiance to the Prussian King and to serve in the Prussian Army, if the promise of a referendum was honestly meant. The Treaty of Vienna had granted the population the right of choosing, within that period, between Prussian and Danish nationality. Each individual should have been allowed to make, if he so wished, a public declaration that he desired to

remain a subject of Denmark. Before 1870 the Sleswick Danes had actually the right of settling in Denmark. The outbreak of the Franco-German War caused about 8,000 men of military age to leave their old home. According to one authority, nearly 40,000 of the Sleswick Danes had become 'optants'—that is, had taken the 'option' of Danish nationality—or had emigrated, by the end of 1880. As Prussia objected to these 'optants' returning to their original home after a short residence in Denmark, a conference was held in 1872 between the two Governments. The result was that most of the 'optants' were allowed by the Prussian authorities to return and remain unmolested, provided that they gave no well-founded cause for complaint, and did not display a hostile spirit towards Prussia.

Thus a final settlement had been made of the question of the 'optants'. They were liable to be expelled at any moment as 'objectionable' characters. To have allowed them to become naturalized would have meant an increase in the majority of Danish electors; and therefore these North Sleswickers who had returned found themselves political outcasts in their own country; and they were debarred from all social intercourse with their friends and relatives if such intercourse was thought to have the slightest political tinge. They were treated as scapegoats by the Prussian authorities, whenever an election resulted unfavourably for the Government. The Danish voters, however, refused to be influenced by the peril to which their 'optant' relatives and neighbours were exposed.

At the elections for the Reichstag in 1886 North Sleswick gained a new leader in Gustav Johannsen, a skilful politician who enjoyed great personal popularity, not only among his fellow countrymen but also

in parliamentary circles at Berlin. He inspired new life and heart into the movement as no leader before him had done. Early in this period the younger generation, who had passed unscathed through the ordeal of Prussian schools and Prussian military service, made their influence felt. The emigrations had ceased; the gaps in the ranks of the opposition were filled up; and a network of patriotic associations was formed all over North Sleswick. There was an association of voters which took in hand the work of political organization. There was a language society which founded Danish libraries in every province. A school society undertook to pay the fees of indigent North Sleswick children at the Danish 'High Schools'. Then there were lecture societies, whose lecturers were of necessity drawn from the North Sleswick district; temperance societies and young men's associations were founded; other societies concerned themselves with agriculture, and the Danish co-operative movement and the Danish dairy industry found their way into Sleswick. Last but not least there was a society to save the land from being bought up by the Prussian Government for the use of German farmers and small-holders. When the number of German church-services increased—any petition for German services from a few German newcomers in a Danish parish has always found a favourable answer—the Danes replied by founding Free Church communities with separate places of worship. These societies are not allowed to use any public assembly room or country inn; but they have erected more than fifty meeting-halls in North Sleswick.

The influence of the Danish local press has been a source of strength to the nationalist opposition. Four daily papers are published in North Sleswick;

of these the most important are the *Flensborg Avis* and the *Heimdal* of Aabenraa. The editors of both these organs have been conspicuous as leaders of the nationalist movement. J. Jessen, the intrepid editor of the *Flensborg Avis*, succeeded Johannsen as the leader of the North Sleswick party in the Reichstag (1901); but his career was cut short in 1906 by his untimely death, which was doubtless due to the long and frequent terms of imprisonment (amounting in all to four years) that he incurred for 'press offences'. He has been succeeded in the leadership by H. P. Hanssen, the editor of the *Heimdal*, who has shown himself an apt pupil of Gustav Johannsen.

Without such leaders, and such varied methods of opposing German pressure, the people of North Sleswick could hardly have held their own in the era of oppression which began in 1888, a few months after the accession of the present Kaiser. His Christmas gift in that year to his Danish subjects was the practical exclusion of the Danish language from the schools; the children were only allowed to use their native tongue in future during the four hours a week which were provided by the time-table for religious instruction. Many of the clergy, even of the German clergy, protested against this regulation and petitioned that at least two hours a week should be devoted to instruction in Danish, the only language which many of the children understood. But the protest and the petition were unavailing. All private schools and private tuition had long ago been prohibited. Since 1888 attendance at the public secondary schools has been made compulsory. The books used in these schools—they are written expressly for North Sleswick—are full of the most contemptuous references to Denmark and everything Danish. It goes

without saying that they give a most distorted version of the history of Denmark and of Sleswick. 'If the children do not understand German, they must be treated and taught like deaf-mutes'; such is the rule that has been prescribed by a Prussian educational authority.

Any lingering hopes of a more liberal system, to say nothing of a fulfilment of the promises of 1866, soon disappeared under the rule of the new Kaiser. Nothing could be blunter than the speech, delivered at Frankfort-on-Oder two months after his accession, in which he declared that he would see eighteen army-corps and forty-two million inhabitants dead on the battle-field rather than surrender a single stone of what Germany had conquered. Of the same significance was the inspired remark in the *Cologne Gazette* that the separation of Sleswick from Germany could only be imagined as happening after a war disastrous to Germany. The Pan-German movement found a fertile field for its operations among the North Sleswickers.

A new governor-general, Von Köller, was imported from Alsace-Lorraine in 1898. A more 'active' and less scrupulous host of new officials willingly executed the Draconian instructions which he issued in the five years of his governorship. About a thousand expulsions were carried out, without the slightest attempt to prove that the victims had broken Prussian laws and regulations. Many a man who had been born and bred in Sleswick suddenly found himself subjected to the disabilities of an 'optant'. Danish farm-hands were expelled, as a means of putting pressure upon their employers, or were ordered to seek employment with 'loyal' farmers. The campaign was even extended to cover the children of 'optants', who, in accordance

with a regulation of 1883, had been entered on the conscription lists and had been enrolled at the age of twenty. Now, when such children applied for papers of naturalization, they met with a curt refusal and were no longer required as conscripts. They were not Danish citizens, and yet they were not allowed to become citizens of Prussia. Some of the local officials tried to deprive parents of any control over the upbringing of their children. In one case a German chimney-sweep was made the guardian of a widow's children: but this particular piece of tyranny was disallowed by the Prussian courts of law.

Even in Germany there were some protests against the policy of Von Köller and his subordinates. Professor Hans Delbrück wrote, in the Prussian *Jahrbücher*:

The last expulsions in Sleswick are most revolting . . . But worse than the brutality which makes us the abomination of the civilized world is the infatuation which believes that lasting results can be secured through such measures as these.

In 1899 Gustav Johannsen gained so much support, when he referred to the subject in the Reichstag and the Prussian Diet, that the Government yielded before the protests of enlightened Germans. The 'Köller era' gradually ebbed out: the Kaiser paid several friendly visits to the Danish Court: and the order went forth from Berlin that gentler tactics should be employed. Expulsion orders were reduced to normal proportions, and most of the children of the 'optants' were admitted to the full rights of Prussian citizenship. The only 'homeless' people who are now to be found in Sleswick are the children, born before 1898, of Danish immigrants into the Duchy.

Every election since 1890 has proved that the

population of North Sleswick is increasingly conscious of its Danish nationality. The elections of 1912 for the Reichstag showed an increase of about 2,000 in the Danish vote; and this in spite of the coercive measures employed by an ever-growing number of German officials, who compelled every functionary and many of the small tradesmen to vote as directed. In the Haderslev-Sönderborg district, the stronghold of the Danish influence, there were 11,736 Danish votes as against 5,340 polled by the Germans and the Socialists together. In the Aabenraa-Flensburg and Tönder-Husum divisions there were slight increases in the Danish minority. The elections of 1913 for the Prussian Diet showed an even more marked progress, especially in the southern districts of North Sleswick. In the Aabenraa division the Danish candidate was returned with a safe majority. In the towns many of the German inhabitants refused to vote for the German candidate, who was a local official, in order to show their disapproval of the treatment of their Danish neighbours by the police. The results of this election were a subject for rejoicings both in Sleswick and in Denmark; the election was regarded as a trial of strength because it occurred just before the fiftieth anniversary of the separation of the Duchy from the mother-country. Many young Sleswickers, whose parents had supported the 'Schleswig-Holstein' movement and the Prussian candidates, had now joined the camp of their Danish fellow countrymen. It was hoped that, in course of time, all the 16,000 Danish-speaking inhabitants of central Sleswick might follow the example. The present war has for the moment postponed the fulfilment of such hopes.

No less than 15,000 North Sleswickers of military age

have loyally obeyed the Prussian call to arms. Whether living abroad or in the country, they made no attempt to evade the stern duty which was imposed upon them of fighting against their natural friends on behalf of their natural enemies. While the mobilization was in progress, this loyalty was rewarded by the arrest of all the prominent Danes, both men and women, in North Sleswick. The intention of the Prussian authorities was to strike terror into those who remained at home.

North of the river Eider, the old frontier between Denmark and Germany, there stands beside the parish church an elder-tree, about which there is a local prophecy that, when it is large enough for a horse to be tethered to it, then the King of Denmark shall keep tryst here with the King of the Germans, a man with a withered arm; and then the frontier line shall be fixed in peace and amity. The elder-tree has long since reached the girth demanded by the prophecy.

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